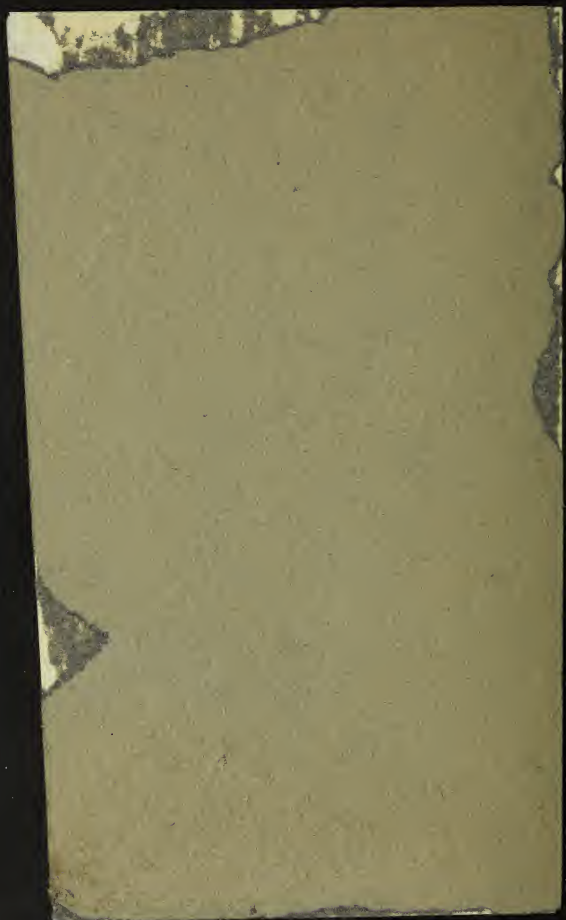


City
Superintendents
of Schools



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The technical duties of a city superintendent are administrative. He is the executive officer of the constituted school authorities. The direction and control of schools, primarily in the people, by them is lawfully delegated to a number of persons variously termed Directors, Committee, Inspectors, or Boards of Education. Originally, these authorities, themselves, performed all the duties pertaining to their office, personally and directly managing and controlling the conduct of the schools.

HISTORY.

In 1851 the School Committee of Boston determined that an executive officer of the committee, a man skillful in his profession and adapted by temperament and education to the duties, ought to be placed as an intermediate agent between the committee and the schools; one who should devote his entire time to executing the directions of the committee. Nathan Bishop was elected in

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the month of May of that year. The movement for the establishment of this office began several years earlier. Its scope and objects were ably set forth in the first printed report of the board, viz.: the famous one of 1845. Mr. Mann had suggested the need of additional means of supervision in his first report of 1838, and in some paper not long afterward he had specially suggested the expediency of appointing a superintendent of the primary schools of Boston. As a matter of fact the first superintendent had supervision of the grammar and high schools not of the primary, which were managed by another school board. The office of superintendent was established in Providence about 1839 and Nathan Bishop held the office until elected in Boston. The office had a temporary existence in Springfield before it was established in Boston, but had been discontinued there. Professor Greene was superintendent at Springfield in 1842, and the office ended with his service. This seems to have been the initial move-

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ment which has resulted in a custom now quite generally adopted. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the propriety of the existence of such an office but rather to portray something of the duties which to-day belong to it.

DUTIES.

But the inquiry is made, even at the present day, "Why the expense and machinery of a superintendent?" The answer frequently is such as would summarily abolish the office. I take it that no valid objection can be made to efficient supervision in any department of our social or political economy. Objections probably arise amongst those whose observations have been made in an unfortunate direction. What number of schools can economically employ the whole time of a supervising officer is a proper question. In industrial establishments, as well as in enterprises requiring unskilled manual labor, employers insist upon abundant supervision. A great railroad company

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places one man to boss three or four. Every factory, large or small, has its foreman and its bosses. Experience has taught that such an arrangement pays financially. The conclusions are quite as reasonable in the conduct of schools; where even a small aggregation of schools is, there an able superintendent can be profitably engaged.

The written laws prescribing the duties of a superintendent although variously framed, are nearly identical in substance. "He shall have an oversight of all public schools within the boundaries of the district and shall perform such duties as may be prescribed by the board of education."

This formula presents a trivial idea of the complexity and magnitude of the labors of the office, and yet it covers the whole matter.

Two distinct and separate classes of duties are demanded of the intelligent superintendent: one relating to the board, the other relating to the schools. Facing the one he is never to have his back to the other; he is to be director,

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petitioner, advisor, or servitor according to the case in hand. Although his formulated duties do not so prescribe, yet his chief duty towards the board is that of adviser. Unfortunately constituted is that board that does not seek his advice; more unfortunate is that superintendent who is unable to give healthful advice.

FINANCES.

To do so he must be familiar, first, with the financial affairs of the district. He must know about the assessment roll and about the tax collector's returns; he must be acquainted with the sources of income, and with the ratio of school expenses to other municipal expenses. Money is the greatest power in upbuilding school interests. A community may be intelligent to a high degree, may be unanimous in a desire to establish and maintain an excellent public school system, but no good resolutions can take the place of an empty treasury. In States west of Ohio this knowledge is of great

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moment, because extraordinary provision must annually be made for great increase in school population. When many towns annually levy a school tax ten times greater than the rate of the entire State, county and municipal tax of Connecticut, when nearly half of all the money paid to the tax collector for all purposes is expended towards maintaining schools and building school-houses, notwithstanding streets are to be graded, bridges constructed, public buildings erected, water and gas works provided, sewers built, fire and police departments and courts of justice maintained, with such great expenses for schools, it well behooves the adviser of the board to remember when he would ask for helpful but not necessary accessories for the conduct of the schools, to be able intelligently to count the cost ere he asks for the expenditure.

The school tax in a little town in Illinois is three per centum of the assessed valuation of the district. Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska can furnish many instances of a rate of school tax

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that would cause a New England man to stand aghast with fear lest ruin compass the land. A part of one Western city the present year is paying a school tax of two per centum, while the entire tax for all other purposes is two per centum.

EXPENDITURES.

The superintendent in connection with the board must assist in tempering the expenditures to the reasonable income, that the efficiency of the schools be not impaired. He must be able to suggest modes of retrenchment other than one reducing the pay of teachers. Care is requisite that the proper number of pupils be assigned to each school. If necessary, few calls can be made for improvements in buildings, for supplies, and for apparatus. He must be ready with make-shifts in all directions, except in that of instructors, in order that low salaries of teachers be not made still lower. Of all public institutions in the West, the schools are nearest to the people. The

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school-house and its inmates are within easy striking distance of every man and every woman in the district. When the effect of straightened finances reaches the taxpayers, the schools are usually the first target for the aims of retrenchment.

The superintendent, if he be well informed in public finance, can do much toward averting the calamity of employing poor teachers at low salaries by pointing out other methods of reduction. It should ever be remembered that the typical city of the Northern States is ready to pay without murmur all necessary tax for the support of schools, but the city demands a dollar's worth of school for every dollar expended.

SCHOOL HOUSES.

Second, the superintendent should be well informed in the arrangement and construction of school-houses. What enormous blots lie scattered all over our fair land in the shape of abortions, miscalled school-houses! Maine is full of them; California is not free from

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them; like carcasses on the plains they lie broadcast in the Mississippi valley. Magnificent cities and humble villages have alike been struck with the calamity of misshapen, ill-constructed, unhealthful, inconvenient preposterous school-houses. To remember that the people furnish millions of dollars gladly for ignorant boards and superintendents to squander, is to feel that one has the right to question the propriety of the existence of the office of superintendent. It is futile to say that the superintendent has no authority in this direction; he has what often is better than authority, he has advisory power and his superior knowledge, if he have it, is certain to influence his associates.

Of all professions, that of the architect seems to contain the grandest, noblest and most skillful elements. Every true man does admire and reverence the art of the true architect; but those who do plan and construct a school-house economically, that shall be comfortable, healthful, and convenient are few in number. Why should

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an architect be expected to be informed as to the desirable interior arrangements of a school-house? Who but the practical and studious school-master can tell the necessities of the case? The latter is useless without the former; the architect should not be permitted to work alone. As is the unfortunate custom, the appearance of the exterior of the building is often of the greatest moment, the interior arrangements must be modified to suit the outside. The people assist the architect by insisting upon a towered ornament to the town, while the board and superintendent, often only superintendent, urge that the money be spent on the inside for health and work and not on the outside for pomp and show. Year after year we are building on, duplicating mistakes, profiting not by the experience of all that have built before us. Probably as many school-house monstrosities are erecting this year as in any preceding year. One can find them in New England, New York, and Ohio,

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that part of the country to which we look for examples. The duties of superintendents require them to call a halt and see that gross blunders be not repeated. This means that the superintendent shall have made a study of the subject and be intimate not necessarily with the details of construction but with all that pertains to convenience in work and to the promotion and preservation of health.

INCIDENTAL EXPENSES.

Third, the superintendent should be prompt to advise in the matter of expenditures. School boards are inclined to be extravagant. One will find that a board elected on an issue of retrenchment, will often contain elements that are prone to lavish expenditure. They are sure to see opportunities of reducing the pay-roll but are unwittingly led in the other direction. A shrewd business agent for dealers in apparatus, books, maps, patent short cuts or gim-cracks of various sorts, is able to demonstrate to the board member all the virtues and merits of his wares and

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speedily makes a convert. The goods are often ordered soon to be laid aside in the cellar. Principals and teachers too often join in requesting such investments with no thought of the outlay. How many of us care to take a careful inventory of all such purchases by the authorities during the last ten years as may to-day be found in the cellars and garrets of our school-buildings? These leaks from the treasury amount to a large sum. It is usually in the power of the superintendent to stop them; he should be so intelligently conservative as to advise investment only when commensurate returns are certain. He should not allow the people's money to be spent in such experiments if he can prevent it. In recommending changes involving cost, he should watch the emptying purse, and avoid all possible outlay except the outlay for skill to fill the places of instructors.

CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS.

Fourth, the superintendent should see that the board is informed as to the

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current conduct of the schools. This is necessary because the board is the official, therefore the most emphatic medium between the schools and the people. Pupils' and teachers' comments upon the management are quite secondary to the utterances of him whom the people have selected to represent them on the board of management. It is no easy task to see that the individual members are familiar with the issues that continually arise. Formal meetings are not sufficient to accomplish the purpose, personal interviews are necessary.

PROPERTY.

Fifth, the care of the school property is directly in the line of the superintendent's duties; this places him in direct relation to the janitors or custodians of the buildings during other than school hours. Neat and well preserved school-houses, with fences, out-houses, furniture and all that pertains to the premises are essential accompaniments to good schools. A broken pane, pencil

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or chalk marks or whittlings in out-houses or on fences not only indicate weakness in supervision but are also a positive barrier to making desirable character among the pupils. The superintendent is the only person who can and will make visits of inspection and spur janitors and principals to eternal vigilance. A coat of paint, a day's work on roof, resetting a fence post can prevent, sometimes, expensive repairs; the superintendent is most likely to discover these needs and by suggestions to the board extensive outlays may be avoided.

THE PEOPLE.

It is in the other direction, towards the other side of the field, to the schools and the people that from the superintendent's place the outlook is far reaching. Here it is that technical, professional skill is the effective element of action. The number of professional, studied superintendents in this country is alarmingly small. Not the pecuniary remuneration, the glory of ambition, philanthropic love, nor a desire to be

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and to do good has so far been sufficient to induce the necessary number of men to prepare for and engage in the work of school supervision. The position itself is not a widely acknowledged distinctive occupation. In time it will assume that dignity that is not now accorded to it. The position of teacher is now often considered as demanding principally text-book scholarship; the superintendent's office can never be exalted except as a sequel to the exaltation of the teacher, an intimate and practical knowledge of whose work is a necessity to the superintendent. He must be a fair general scholar; he must have passed through several years of technical training both as pupil and teacher; he is not to the best degree able to supervise primary, grammar, or high schools unless he has for a reasonable time served as a teacher in these respective schools. The conditions of public education force into the superintendent's harness persons whose preparation has been inadequate, whose work has not been such as has fitted

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them for the duties. Men of great capacity and liberal education are frequently pressed into the service of school boards and then learn for the first time by practice what before they had only known in theory. A clear loss follows the early administration of such supervisors: the illustrations are at hand and are familiar. And so instead of having a large number of well-prepared superintendents, we are compelled continually to make over material prepared for quite another and different calling in life. With this thought in mind, it is not strange that the necessity of the office is sometimes questioned.

TEACHERS.

The relations of the superintendent to the teacher are exceedingly delicate and difficult of management. He finds himself associated with ladies and gentlemen any one of whom has, in certain directions, superior qualifications. They are quite his equals, socially and intellectually, frequently his superiors. He

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is so to adjust these forces as to accomplish the work of the whole field in the best way. His view is of the entire situation and, often a course of conduct, right and necessary, is insisted upon quite against the judgment of his associates. Confidence in his management is essential to success.

The little frictions and misunderstandings such as ever arise in small and intimate communities are to be regulated; carelessness and shiftlessness are to be upbraided; errors are to be corrected and insubordination is promptly to be followed by dismissal. Such things and many more are to be accomplished when neither the power of the general of the army nor of the overseer of the shop can reasonably or profitably be vested in the superintendent.

INSTRUCTION.

Again, he is to teach, and in no part of the work is more skill required than in properly and effectively teaching a teacher how to teach, es-

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pecially one who is failing in the school, and yet who presents to the inspector many crude, unorganized yet strong elements of a true teacher. To tell a teacher that the work is unsatisfactory because the results are unsatisfactory is easy and cheap. The schools would be soon relieved of the great mass of excellent young persons by such a line of attack. The superintendent's duties require him to help the teacher to do satisfactory work by giving intelligent and dexterous assistance. To do this involves superior knowledge on his part. At the frequent assemblages of teachers the superintendent is so to preside as to enable each to appropriate from the other whatever can be obtained in the way of helpful suggestions for the conduct of the classes, never concealing the relative merits of his associates, even though his own pride do suffer. These meetings must be frequent and are always helpful when properly conducted. The harm arising from interference with methods of discipline and instruction is to be avoided by giving

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all possible personal latitude. Appropriated methods are too often soulless, heartless, mechanical operations. A teacher to be in the best way successful, must not be subjected to dictation in details.

It is to or for the pupils that the superintendent's greatest force, thought, and study must be directed. All effort has but one aim, all instruments and means one object. All interests center at the children. The schools are for them. Every element of power is ultimately exerted here. The advancement of the pupils' interests is the desideratum of all school management.

The superintendent must be able to classify so that reasonable allotments of pupils to teacher be made; to make provisions for extraordinary pupils whether of mental or physical peculiarities; to avoid inflexible laws; to modify rules; to allay prejudice, to forgive offenses, to advise whipping, to expel pupils, to cultivate morality, to form character, to retain boys in school when

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they would rather go to work, and to make the children happy. The superintendent of a system of schools should be the publicly acknowledged friend and often the confidant and private counsellor of the young people. He ought to be a welcome visitor at home and at school. He must be able to talk with pupils of every grade, placing himself on their plane of thought and impulse. He ought to be a father, thereby from an intimate knowledge of his own children's lives be the better able to approach and advise the children of other people.

PARENTS.

Looking towards teacher and pupil, one sees beyond in the same direction the parents and people. Each individual in the community understands that his is the right to inquire into the conduct and suggest as to the management of the school. Dictation, advice, complaint, and approbation are lavishly contributed. The superintendent is the appointed person to receive

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these tenders. He must listen courteously, appropriate the helpful suggestions, redress grievances, mollify complaints, and be comforted by approbation, but not disheartened by blame. He stands the representative of the board in the conduct of the schools before the people. In this line of his duties, requirements not heretofore mentioned are demanded. A knowledge of humanity, not acquired from books, but from men, a true notion of business and of family relations, an appreciation of home in its thousand forms and conditions, of paternal and maternal discipline in its various degrees, of the loves and hates of neighborhoods, of the breeding and antecedents of parents; in fact, a knowledge of all that goes to make up one peculiar American social community, is needed by the superintendent, that he may properly and successfully administer and adjust such matters connected with school life as are daily brought before him. It is important that he so adjudicate that appeals from his decision be seldom, that

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the board be not often annoyed by called meetings for the purpose of re-opening cases of alleged grievances upon which judgment has already been pronounced. This latter class of duties demand strength of manhood as the busy world makes manhood, and calls for an activity of a sort that can not be found in him whose life has been a purely literary one, spent among books alone in the library. A quarrel prevented by the tact or foresight of the superintendent may save the entire system from an overturning that long time only could right.

To keep abreast of the professional advance is manifestly a duty. Informed of the doings and requirements of other jurisdictions all over the land, he is able, if properly conservative, to avoid any foolish episodes of his contemporaries.

I have written of the typical district where the average superintendent is called to supervise the school. Old crystallized school systems, and the very large new ones being relatively

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few in number, could hardly be considered in a paper on the duties of city superintendents.

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